

## ‘CALCULATED TO STRIKE TERROR’: THE AMRITSAR MASSACRE AND THE SPECTACLE OF COLONIAL VIOLENCE\*

I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed and I consider this is the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral, and widespread effect it was my duty to produce, if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the casualties would be greater in proportion. *It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd;* but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer explained the reasoning behind his order to fire at point-blank range into a large crowd of Indian civilians gathered in Amritsar, in the Punjab province of India, in April 1919 (see Plate 1).

Britain had emerged victorious from the First World War only to be plunged into a global crisis that radically transformed the very nature of its empire. Unrest in India, Egypt, Ireland and Mesopotamia, and the opening of the Third Anglo-Afghan War, coincided with a period of profound international destabilization. In India the continuation of repressive wartime measures, coercive recruitment practices and economic hardship caused widespread disillusionment among the population in Punjab, many of whom had initially supported the British war effort. In an attempt to stop the spread of nationalist protests and curb Gandhi's emergent mass movement, the British authorities arrested and deported two local nationalist leaders from Amritsar. This pre-emptive move on the part of the authorities provoked extensive riots across the city, during which scores of

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<sup>1</sup> Brigadier-General R. E. H. Dyer to the General Staff, 25 Aug. 1919, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee, 1919–1920: Evidence*, iii: *Amritsar* (Calcutta, 1920), 203. This is usually referred to as the Hunter Committee Report.

Indian protesters were shot down while five Europeans were killed by angry crowds. Political meetings had been banned and an uneasy calm prevailed when, on the afternoon of Sunday 13 April, Dyer went to the walled enclosure known as Jallianwala Bagh to disperse the mass meeting.<sup>2</sup>

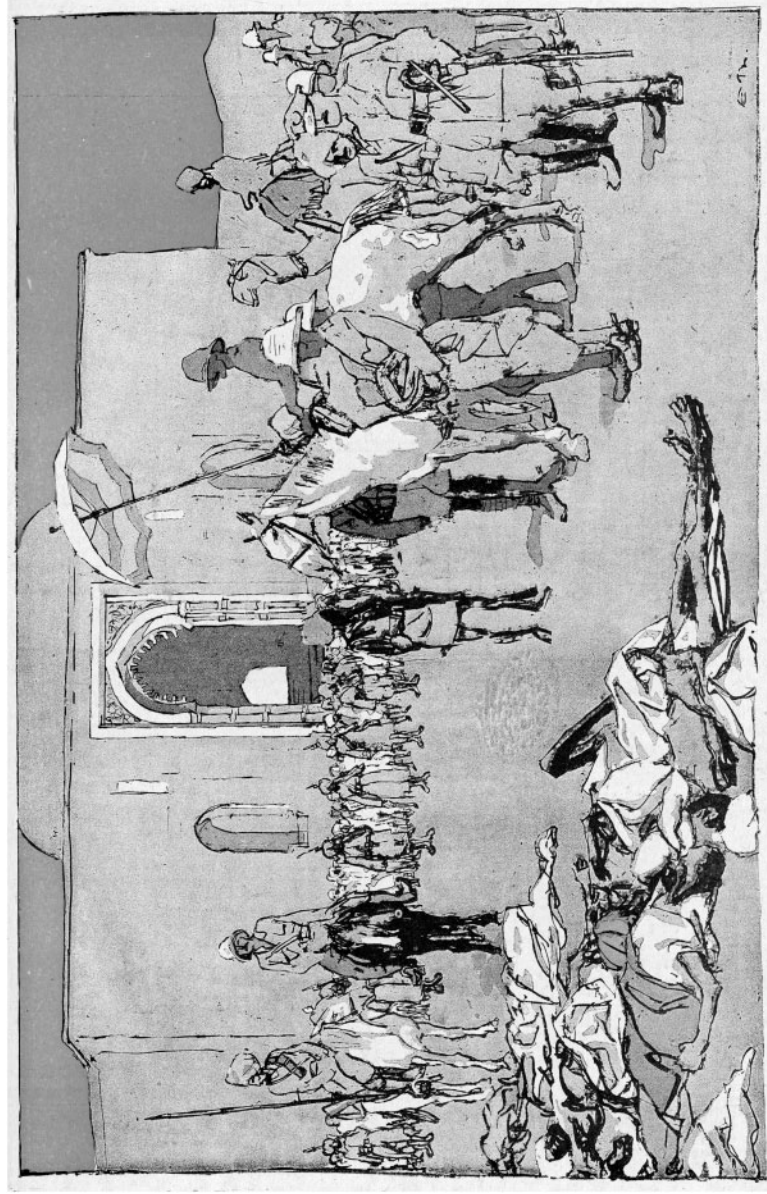
Credited as the event that galvanized the first major anti-colonial nationalist movement and inexorably set Indian nationalists, including Gandhi, on the path towards independence, the Amritsar massacre, however, remains poorly understood. Like Sharpeville and Bloody Sunday, the event has become a byword for colonial violence, usually encapsulated by formulaic reference to the 379 civilians killed and more than twelve hundred wounded by the 1,650 bullets fired by the colonial troops over the duration of ten minutes.<sup>3</sup> In the recent mammoth volume *A World Connecting*, Charles S. Maier's contribution simply lists the massacre among a litany of European colonial conflicts of the early twentieth century, describing how 'General Reginald Dyer famously emptied his machine guns against assembled Indians at Amritsar in 1919'.<sup>4</sup> This invocation of the massacre merely as shorthand for colonial brutality brings to mind Jordanna Bailkin's poignant observation that 'there is nothing more banal about colonial projects than their violence'. Making sense of colonial violence, however, is a different matter, and this article seeks to understand its forms and functions rather than, to use Bailkin's words, 'simply taking it for granted'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The most recent literature on the subject includes Derek Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre, 1919–1920', *Past and Present*, no. 131 (May 1991); Nasser Hussain, *The Jurisprudence of Emergency: Colonialism and the Rule of Law* (Ann Arbor, 2003); Nigel Collett, *The Butcher of Amritsar: General Reginald Dyer* (London, 2005); Taylor C. Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India* (London, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> These are the official figures and contemporary Indian estimates are considerably higher: see *Correspondence between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India on the Report of Lord Hunter's Committee* (London, 1920); *Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress*, 2 vols. (Lahore, 1920), i.

<sup>4</sup> Charles S. Maier, 'Leviathan 2.0: Inventing Modern Statehood', in Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 2012), 192. Dyer did not in fact use his machine guns, nor did he 'empty' his ammunition; these are just some of the oft-repeated misconceptions about the Amritsar massacre. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton's references to the massacre elsewhere in the volume are rather more pertinent: see 'Empires and the Reach of the Global', *ibid.*, 309, 418.

<sup>5</sup> Jordanna Bailkin, 'The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India?', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xlviii, 2 (2006), 466.



1. A rather fanciful depiction of the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre as imagined by the German artist Eduard Thöny, who had just spent four years producing anti-British propaganda cartoons. From *Simplicissimus*, 21 Jan. 1920, 615. Image courtesy of the Mary Evans Picture Library.

The periodization of the Amritsar massacre can similarly be said to have been taken for granted and, as indicated by the title of Alfred Draper's popular account *Amritsar: The Massacre that Ended the Raj*, the events at Jallianwala Bagh are commonly seen to mark the beginning of the historical process that concluded with Indian independence in 1947.<sup>6</sup> Assumed to have been the direct result of the global changes brought about by the First World War, the massacre thus provides the starting point in studies of decolonization that focus exclusively on the twentieth century and privilege change over continuity. In his renowned work on the 'Wilsonian moment', for instance, Erez Manela includes a chapter entitled 'From Paris to Amritsar', implying a more or less direct link between the Peace Conference held in 1919 and the events at Jallianwala Bagh, a connection that is never substantiated.<sup>7</sup> In such accounts, the causes behind the massacre are identified exclusively in terms of short-term factors unique to the world after 1918 as a particular historical moment and shaped largely by events outside British India, and therefore, ultimately, external to the dynamics of colonial rule.<sup>8</sup> While the ubiquity of violence as a central part of the colonial order is explicitly acknowledged in recent scholarship on decolonization, the periodization nevertheless remains unchanged, and colonial violence is still framed by a chronologically bounded argument.<sup>9</sup>

In the following, two distinct but interrelated points are made: how to read colonial violence, and how to read a historical event in

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Draper, *Amritsar: The Massacre that Ended the Raj* (London, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> The suggestion that the Amritsar massacre was a direct result of the trauma sustained by the British during the First World War must be dismissed out of hand: see Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke, 2009), 64–5. For a more sophisticated argument, see Jon Lawrence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence, and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxv, 3 (Sept. 2003).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005); David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005); Benjamin Grob-Fitzgibbon, *Imperial Endgame: Britain's Dirty Wars and the End of Empire* (Basingstoke, 2011); Martin Thomas, 'Colonial Minds and Colonial Violence: The Sétif Uprising and the Savage Economics of Colonialism', in Martin Thomas (ed.), *The French Colonial Mind*, 2 vols. (Lincoln, Nebr., 2011), ii; Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge, 2012).

the context of the *longue durée*. These points are connected, and only by recognizing the extent to which an event such as the Amritsar massacre was produced by its historical precedents, rather than just by historical contingencies, can we begin to understand the meaning of its violence. Whereas most studies of the massacre effectively focus on its aftermath — its political impact and the public debates and legal issues it raised — this article examines the structural dynamics of the event itself as a particularly illuminating instance of colonial violence. Understanding how colonial violence worked, or was believed to work, as a technique of power goes to the very heart of recent debates on the nature and legacies of imperialism.<sup>10</sup> Demonstrations of violence were intrinsic to the colonial encounter, not just in British India, but throughout the European empires in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. By examining the structural continuities of the Amritsar massacre, this article asks us to re-envision in a novel fashion the way we think about colonial violence across imperial formations.

The nature of colonial violence in the twentieth century was not simply a function of, nor coterminous with, imperial decline after 1918 as Britain and other European powers sought to hold onto their empires by all possible means. In the case of Amritsar, rather than being the beginning of the end, as it were, the violence of the massacre might be better understood as the final stage of a much longer process. With the massacre bearing more than a passing resemblance to a firing squad on a massive scale, the logic that informed it harked back to the early days of the Raj and the spectacles of public execution of which the British made such widespread use in times of crisis. In a recent study of everyday violence in British India, Elizabeth Kolsky has argued that

the history of violence in British India cannot be understood by traversing from one cataclysmic event to the next, from the Battle of Plassey to the Uprising of 1857 to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, as the micro-moments betwixt and between these macro-events are where the violence central to the workings of empire can be found.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Niall Ferguson's controversial *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London, 2003) has been followed by a spate of recent publications, including Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London, 2011); Jeremy Paxman, *Empire: What Ruling the World Did to the British* (London, 2011); Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 2011), 2.



'Traversing from one cataclysmic event to the next' is nevertheless exactly what this article proposes to do. While quotidian acts of violence may have defined the subaltern experience of colonialism more generally, it is in the study of crises that historians are offered a glimpse, however brief, of the colonial state stripped bare and the demonstration of power expressed in the pure form of brute force. It is, I suggest, moments of acute vulnerability (real and imagined) that reveal the inner workings of colonial rule, as the British in India enacted extreme forms of violence, not merely to preserve law and order, but to preserve their own lives.<sup>12</sup>

## I

### AMRITSAR REVISITED

Ever since Winston Churchill in 1920 proclaimed that the Amritsar massacre was an isolated event, while Gandhi argued instead that it was the function of the colonial 'system' itself, historians have struggled to make sense of Dyer's actions.<sup>13</sup> Enjoying the staunch support of his superiors in the Punjab administration, Dyer's decision to fire was later condemned by the British Indian government and he was eventually dismissed from the army following the Hunter Commission inquiry. The reception Dyer received upon his return to the imperial metropole, however, revealed the tension and political divides of post-war Britain. The conservative newspaper the *Morning Post* famously organized a subscription in support of the disgraced imperial soldier, whom many regarded as a hero betrayed by liberal politicians. Dyer's dismissal was upheld by the House of Commons but, notably, not by the House of Lords. Nigel Collett's mammoth biography of Dyer, *The Butcher of Amritsar*, which remains the key work on the subject, constitutes perhaps the strongest example of the *ad hominem* approach:

Dyer stands alone in modern British history. Nowhere in the world since the Indian Mutiny of 1857 have the British turned such violence upon a civilian population. Not since 1919 has anything approaching what he did been repeated . . . It is therefore to his life that we must turn for an

<sup>12</sup> This is also the point cogently made by Hussain, *Jurisprudence of Emergency*.

<sup>13</sup> *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxx, col. 1725 (8 July 1920); Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre', 133.

understanding of one of the most infamous events in Indian and British history, and for an explanation of what it was that persuaded Dyer to act as he did . . .<sup>14</sup>

In his article on British responses to the massacre, Derek Sayer, on the other hand, argues that the key to understanding the violence may be found in the paternalism of British colonial discourse. Thus, it was the place the local population occupied 'within their rulers' moral universe' that explained how 'they could be slaughtered for moral effect'.<sup>15</sup> While the emphasis on the role of the individual in shaping events leaves room for the reputation of the empire to remain largely untarnished, the structural interpretation identifies violence as a central aspect of imperialism. For many Indians, then as now, the Amritsar massacre revealed the true face of the Raj, belying in the most dramatic way the expectations of political reforms nurtured during the war.<sup>16</sup> In nationalist historiography and popular memory, General Dyer has thus become little more than a synecdoche for the British empire, the racial arrogance and callous brutality of which provides a jarring contrast to Gandhi's teaching of passive resistance and non-violence.<sup>17</sup> The pre-eminent Indian historian of the subject V. N. Datta, for instance, argued that 'it is obvious that Dyer was primarily motivated by revenge'.<sup>18</sup> In this intentionalist analysis, the Amritsar massacre is reduced to a carefully orchestrated act of vengeance and colonial violence defined by individualized emotions as an erratic response to the heroism of nationalist protests.

The arguments that Dyer's personality provided the key to his actions, or that it was the colonial condition pure and simple that caused the massacre, are nevertheless inadequate and ultimately untenable when examining the Amritsar massacre. Dyer

<sup>14</sup> Collett, *Butcher of Amritsar*, p. x.

<sup>15</sup> Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre', 163. Sayer was here deliberately challenging the earlier sociological work of Helen Fein, who sought to explain the events of 1919 by invoking a Durkheimian model of colonial society, with 'class' and 'race' as the sole determinants of conflict: see Helen Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgment, 1919-1920* (Honolulu, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> After independence in 1947, the Amritsar massacre was teleologically refashioned as a key moment in the freedom struggle, and the official memorial pays homage to nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and the sacrifice of the 'martyrs' killed at Jallianwala Bagh.

<sup>17</sup> K. L. Tuteja, 'Jallianwala Bagh: A Critical Juncture in the Indian National Movement', *Social Scientist*, xxv, 1/2 (Jan.-Feb. 1997).

<sup>18</sup> V. N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh* (Ludhiana, 1969), 168. See also Raja Ram, *The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Premeditated Plan* (Chandigarh, 1969).

emphatically did not act alone, and he was not even the most extreme among the British officials at Amritsar; compared to the proposed aerial bombardment of the city, including the Golden Temple, his actions at Jallianwala Bagh seem positively restrained.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Dyer enjoyed widespread support from a considerable section of the British in India, many, if not most, of whom shared his views. The model of cultural determinism is also not convincing: that the prevailing ideas of paternalism and racial attitudes in British India shaped Dyer's actions should be self-evident, though that could be said of most policies and practices within the empire, and thus essentially lacks explanatory purchase. Though factually accurate, the conventional account of the massacre, powerfully depicted in Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982), is in fact analytically misleading and gives no clue to the motivation behind Dyer's actions beyond a vague impression of the colonial mindset or the personal idiosyncrasies of the stone-faced general. Colonial violence, in this view, is taken for granted, and as such requires no explanation. Yet we cannot locate the causes of violence simply in the circumstances of its enactment, and merely describing the sequence of events leaves the erroneous impression that the Amritsar massacre was simply a response to the threat posed by Gandhi and the Indian nationalist movement.

This inability to make adequate sense of the violence at Amritsar, I argue, is based on the assumption that Dyer reacted to the actual situation in front of him. When considering the primary material, however, one cannot help but notice that the British threat assessment and Dyer's own accounts of the situation bear little or no resemblance to the real circumstances in Amritsar on 13 April. Considering that the unrest in Punjab was at the heart of what has later been described as the 'crisis of empire' — defined by the rise of anti-colonial nationalism, the 'Wilsonian moment' and the spread of pan-Islamism and Bolshevism — we might have expected Dyer and his fellow officers to refer to the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland or the unrest in Egypt, which was unravelling at the same time.<sup>20</sup> But that did not happen, and the true nature of the challenge facing

<sup>19</sup> Diary of Melicent Wathen, 1914–20, 177–9. Thanks to Roderick Wathen for allowing me access to this unique material.

<sup>20</sup> John Gallagher, 'Nationalisms and the Crisis of Empire, 1919–1922', *Modern Asian Studies*, xv (1981).



the British in Punjab was apparently indiscernible to the men on the ground. A few days before the disturbances in Amritsar, Deputy Commissioner Miles Irving warned that a serious confrontation was coming but admitted that 'Who are at the bottom of this I cannot say'.<sup>21</sup> Even the hartals, or general strikes, called by Gandhi in protest against the Rowlatt Acts were not acknowledged by Dyer, who explicitly stated that 'I should say that the acts that were now committed, that is, the uprooting of railway lines, cutting of telegraph wires, murdering of citizens, etc., was more than *hartals*, and the two had nothing to do with each other'.<sup>22</sup> In seeking to avoid what the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has described as 'the ethnographic cardinal sin of ignoring what the people found important', we must therefore follow Ann Stoler's example and read the Amritsar massacre 'along the archival grain'.<sup>23</sup> According to Dyer, the crowd gathered in Jallianwala Bagh were not simply in breach of the prohibition against public meetings:

It is sufficient to say that I know that the final crisis had come, and that the assembly was primarily of the same mobs which had murdered and looted and burnt three days previously, and showed their truculence and contempt of the troops during the intervening days, that it was a deliberate challenge to the Government forces, and that if it were not dispersed effectively, with sufficient impression upon the designs and arrogance of the rebels and their followers we should be overwhelmed during the night or the next day by a combination of the city gangs and of the still more formidable multitude from the villages.<sup>24</sup>

The fact is that Amritsar had been quiet ever since the 10th, and when Dyer entered Jallianwala Bagh three days later, there were neither 'rebels' nor 'multitudes from the villages' ready to invade the British lines. The anti-colonial violence of 1919 was certainly brutal and explosive, but it was not the result of a conspiracy, nor can it appropriately be characterized as a 'rebellion'. Where popular depictions show a peaceful crowd of locals quietly listening to a political speech, however, Dyer instead perceived

<sup>21</sup> Miles Irving to A. J. W. Kitchin, 8 Apr. 1919, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee*, vi; *Punjab Government and Sir Umar Hayat Khan* (Calcutta, 1920), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Dyer, in *Disorders Inquiry Committee*, iii, 137.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago, 2004), 119; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Thinking through Colonial Ontologies* (Princeton, 2009). It may be noted that taking seriously the perception and experience of one's historical interlocutors need not entail an implicit sympathy with, or prioritization of, such views. To understand is not to condone.

<sup>24</sup> *Army: Disturbances in the Punjab. Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B.* [3 July 1920] (London, 1920), 7.

a defiant and murderous mob, which had only days before run rampant through Amritsar and which still had the blood of Englishmen on its hands. Acting upon the rumours of rebellion throughout Punjab, which suggested that the British garrison at Amritsar might be cut off, Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on the crowd. If the forces being mobilized against the British at Amritsar seemed to be hidden, the seriousness of the situation was certainly not. According to Dyer, he felt himself to be

dealing with no mere local disturbance but a rebellion, which, whatever its origin, was aiming at something wide reaching and vastly more serious than local riots and looting . . . Amritsar was in fact the storm centre of a rebellion. The whole Punjab had its eyes on Amritsar, and the assembly of the crowd that afternoon [at Jallianwala Bagh] was for all practical purposes a declaration of war . . .<sup>25</sup>

Under such circumstances, the only appropriate response was the use of force, and Dyer's actions at Jallianwala Bagh reflected commonly held sentiments among the British officers involved in the suppression of the disturbances in 1919. In the colonial capital, for instance, the senior officer commanding openly stated that,

Composed as the crowd was of the scum of Delhi city, I am of firm opinion that if they had got a bit more firing given them it would have done them a world of good and their attitude would be much more amenable and respectful, as force is the only thing that an Asiatic has any respect for.<sup>26</sup>

Dyer simply pursued this logic to its extreme conclusion, as he made explicit when questioned by the Hunter Committee:

Q. I take it that your idea in taking that action was to strike terror?

A. Call it what you like. I was going to punish them. My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression.

Q. To strike terror not only in the city of Amritsar, but throughout the Punjab?

A. Yes, throughout the Punjab. I wanted to reduce their *morale*; the *morale* of the rebels.

This was not, it might be added, simply a military action in support of the civil authorities to disperse a riot, but a massacre intended as punishment. Seeking to justify the notorious 'crawling order', which required Indians to drag themselves on the ground along the street where the British missionary Miss

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> 'Written Statement by Brigadier-General D. H. Drake-Brockman, C.M.G., Commanding Delhi Brigade, Delhi, 16 Oct. 1919', in *Disorders Inquiry Committee*, i: *Delhi* (Calcutta, 1920), 172. Thanks to Mark Condos for pointing me to this quotation.

Sherwood had been attacked during the anti-British riots on 10 April, Dyer further explained that 'My object was not merely to impress the inhabitants, but to appeal to their moral sense in a way which I knew they would understand'.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, there was a cultural specificity to the forms of punishment inflicted on the local population by the British at Amritsar; the guilt of the individuals was more or less irrelevant to the real purpose of the spectacle of violence, namely, the performance of colonial power pure and simple.

When questioned on his understanding of the concept of 'rebellion', Dyer explained to the Hunter Committee that 'I apprehended the danger of mutiny, loss of life, riot, bloodshed and all that sort of thing'.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his reports and testimony, Dyer referred to the Indian rioters as 'rebels' but occasionally slipped into a historically more specific language that unmistakably invoked the Indian uprising, or 'Mutiny', of 1857. This crucial event had occurred some six decades prior to the unrest at Amritsar, yet seemingly retained its relevance for Dyer and other British officials in 1919. Irving, for instance, argued that the prospect of Amritsar being invaded by marauding villagers from the surrounding districts posed the greatest danger during the unrest. In his judgement, 'we should have had a situation not paralleled since the Mutiny'. More or less oblique references to the Indian uprising suffused the official reports and testimonies elicited by the Hunter Committee: a fact acknowledged in the final report.<sup>29</sup> Miss Sherwood herself stated that she was 'convinced that there was a real rebellion in the Punjab, and that General Dyer saved India and us from a repetition of the miseries and cruelties of 1857'.<sup>30</sup> This was not just a colonial phenomenon: during the lengthy debates in the House of Commons and the British press, politicians and journalists of all leanings made reference to 1857.<sup>31</sup>

In order to understand a complex event such as the Amritsar massacre, it is thus necessary to go beyond the conventional time

<sup>27</sup> *Army. . . Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B.*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Testimony of Dyer, 137.

<sup>29</sup> *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc.* (London, 1920), 31.

<sup>30</sup> Letter read out in the House of Commons by Sir William Joyson-Hicks, *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1757 (8 July 1920).

<sup>31</sup> See Sayer, 'British Reactions to the Amritsar Massacre'.

frame and instead deploy what might be called 'thick periodization': an awareness of, and attention to, the varying temporalities at play within a single event.<sup>32</sup> While it is difficult not to agree with Akira Iriye's claim that 'the Great War proved to be the swan song of empires', this emphasis, as Harald Fischer-Tiné also points out, has been overstated at the expense of continuities and long-term factors.<sup>33</sup> Colonial violence was not simply a response to anti-colonial resistance, and only at the most superficial level of historical analysis can the Amritsar massacre be said to have been provoked by the challenge posed by Gandhi and the nationalist movement. The point is not merely that the massacre was not unprecedented, but that we cannot begin to make sense of it in isolation from these precedents. At Amritsar on 13 April 1919, Dyer was responding not to the dramatically changed political situation of the post-war empire, but rather to the spectre of the 'Mutiny'. It is thus to 1857 and the colonial ritual of violence during the nineteenth century that we must look in order to understand the Amritsar massacre.<sup>34</sup>

## II

### 'TERRORS FOR A NATIVE'

There was a roar . . . a bank of white smoke, and a jet and shower of black fragments, sharp and clear, which leaped and bounded in the air; this and a fearful sound from the spectators, as if the reality so far exceeded all previous fancy that it was intolerable; then a dead stillness.

In December 1857, when the uprising in India had been all but suppressed, *The Times* published yet another account from the seemingly endless catalogue of horrors that took place on the

<sup>32</sup> My argument owes much to the work of Veena Das, especially Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (Delhi, 1995), ch. 5; Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, 2006), ch. 6. See also Charles S. Maier, 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era', *American Historical Review*, cv, 3 (2000); Harry Harootian, 'Remembering the Historical Present', *Critical Inquiry*, xxxiii (Spring 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Akira Iriye, 'Beyond Imperialism: The New Internationalism', *Daedalus*, cxxxiv, 2 (2005), 115; Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Indian Nationalism and the "World Forces": Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War', *Journal of Global History*, ii, 3 (2007), 344.

<sup>34</sup> For a contemporary iteration of this argument, see Edward Thompson's overlooked classic *The Other Side of the Medal* (London, 1925).

subcontinent that year.<sup>35</sup> Under the prosaic caption 'An Indian Execution', the anonymous correspondent described how five sepoys, or native troops, were blown from the muzzle of cannons for conspiring to mutiny. As the smoke cleared, he proceeded to inspect the scene of the execution:

I walked straight to the scattered and smoking floors before the guns. I came first to an arm, torn off above the elbow, the fist clenched, the bone projecting several inches, bare. Then the ground was sown with red grisly fragments, then a blackhaired head and the other arm still held together . . . close by lay the lower half of the body of the next, torn quite in two, and long coils of entrails twined on the ground. Then a long cloth in which one had been dressed rolled open like a floorcloth and on fire. One man lay in a complete and shattered heap, all but the arms; the legs were straddled wide apart, and the smashed body on the middle of them; the spine exposed; the head lay close by, too . . . The troops immediately marched off, and I rode home at speed, and when I dismounted the dogs came and licked my feet.<sup>36</sup>

At a time when, according to Michel Foucault, modern states had long replaced the spectacle of the scaffold with penal institutions, the British in India still had recourse to exemplary punishment through singularly brutal rites of public executions.<sup>37</sup> The practice of execution by cannon was originally a Mughal practice, which appears to have been used as late as the twentieth century in Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> The physical destruction of the body had a distinct religious function within the cultural context of the Indian subcontinent as it effectively prevented the customary funeral rites of Muslims, as well as Hindus, and the punishment thus extended beyond death. Europeans first encountered this technique during the mid 1700s, and it soon became the favoured means by which to quell mutinies among the native troops of the East India Company.<sup>39</sup> (See Plate 2.)

<sup>35</sup> 'An Indian Execution', *Times*, 3 Dec. 1857, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, 1977). For a more recent work on executions within a non-European context, see Stacey Hynd, *Imperial Gallows: Capital Punishment, Violence and Colonial Rule in Britain's African Territories, c.1903–1968* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> See C. J. Wills, *In the Land of the Lion and Sun: or, Modern Persia. Experiences of Life in Persia during a Residence of Fifteen Years in Various Parts of that Country from 1866 to 1881* (London, 1883), 203. The Wikipedia page 'Blowing from a Gun' is uncharacteristically useful: <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blowing\\_from\\_a\\_gun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blowing_from_a_gun)> (accessed 15 July 2016).

<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, 'Extract of the General Letter from Bombay', 30 Apr. 1780: British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, India Office Records, Home Misc., H/149 (5), 111.

Closely following the ritual model provided by judiciary practices in the imperial homeland, the British in India nevertheless favoured hanging when executing criminals. Controlling the symbolism of public executions, however, proved increasingly difficult within a colonial context, and the hanging of hundreds of highway robbers known as Thugs during the 1830s had fully exposed the porous nature of colonial rituals of power.<sup>40</sup> The Thugs signally failed to conform to the expected behaviour of the condemned: they boldly climbed the scaffold and, rather than letting the low-caste executioners touch them, tightened the noose around their own neck and then simply stepped off the platform, effectively taking command of the ritual that was intended to reflect their submission to the legal process of the colonial state.<sup>41</sup> British officials had to infer (rather wistfully) the deterrent efficacy of such executions, claiming that the behaviour of the prisoners 'has removed all doubt of their guilt from the minds of the spectators, and left in their bosoms a feeling of indignation unmixed with any degree of sympathy for their sufferings'.<sup>42</sup> The truth is that the Indian spectators probably felt nothing of the kind. Like a widow becoming *sati* by joining her husband's body on the funeral pyre, criminals about to be executed were commonly believed to be in possession of semi-divine powers: 'They have a superstition', wrote one British officer, 'that a man about to be executed imparts a sanctity to all he touches; and in a manner similar to this, he always throws flowers among the crowd, who eagerly scramble for them'.<sup>43</sup> The British might have sought to convince themselves that these executions went according to plan. Their very own accounts, however, insisting on the public approval of colonial authority, could not hide their unease about a public ritual the symbolism of which was increasingly slipping out of their control. In the absence of a shared cultural framework, or a legitimate claim to

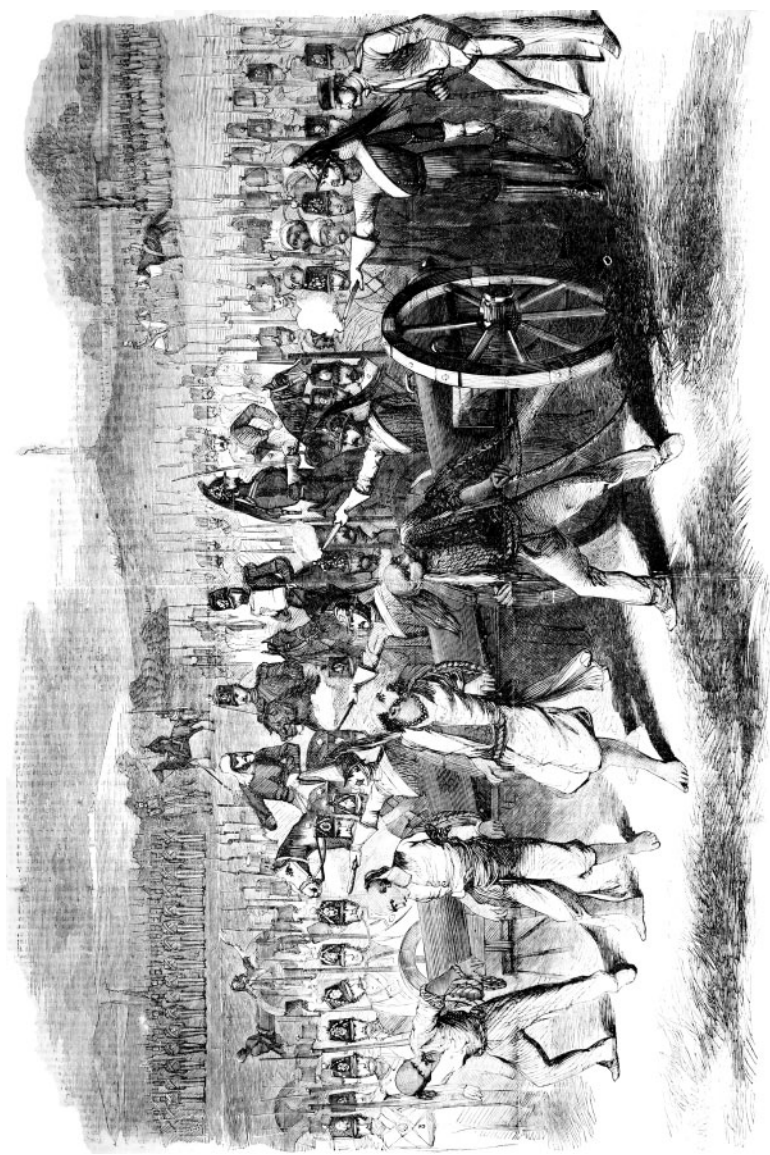
<sup>40</sup> See Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Basingstoke, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> Henry H. Spry, *Modern India: With Illustrations of the Resources and Capabilities of Hindūstan* (London, 1837), 165–8.

<sup>42</sup> W. H. Sleeman to F. C. Smith, 15 Aug. 1832: British Library, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, Board's Collections, F/4/1406/55521.

<sup>43</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel Fitzclarence, *Journal of a Route across India, through Egypt, to England: In the Latter End of the Year 1817, and the Beginning of 1818* (London, 1819), 157.





2. An execution of sepoys during the Indian uprising of 1857. From *Harper's Weekly*, 15 Feb. 1862.

power, the British could never be certain that the ritual of public executions was intelligible to their Indian subjects.<sup>44</sup> If convicted murderers could project an image of unbowed piety on the scaffold, the British were even less likely to achieve the intended effect in the execution of high-caste sepoys. During moments of crisis, such uncertainty in the very performance of power and authority was little short of disastrous. As regiment after regiment broke out in mutiny across northern India during the summer of 1857, soon coalescing into popular risings that threatened to upend British rule, the colonial state thus unleashed its entire arsenal of exemplary violence.

The main concern of the British was to prevent the spread of rebellion, and it was in that context that the first mass execution of forty sepoys by cannon had been ordered in Peshawar on 13 June 1857 (see Plate 3). This was only the first of many such mass executions, but it set a precedent for British violence throughout the uprising. A contemporary British newspaper report elaborated on the cultural specificity of the ritual enacted in Peshawar:

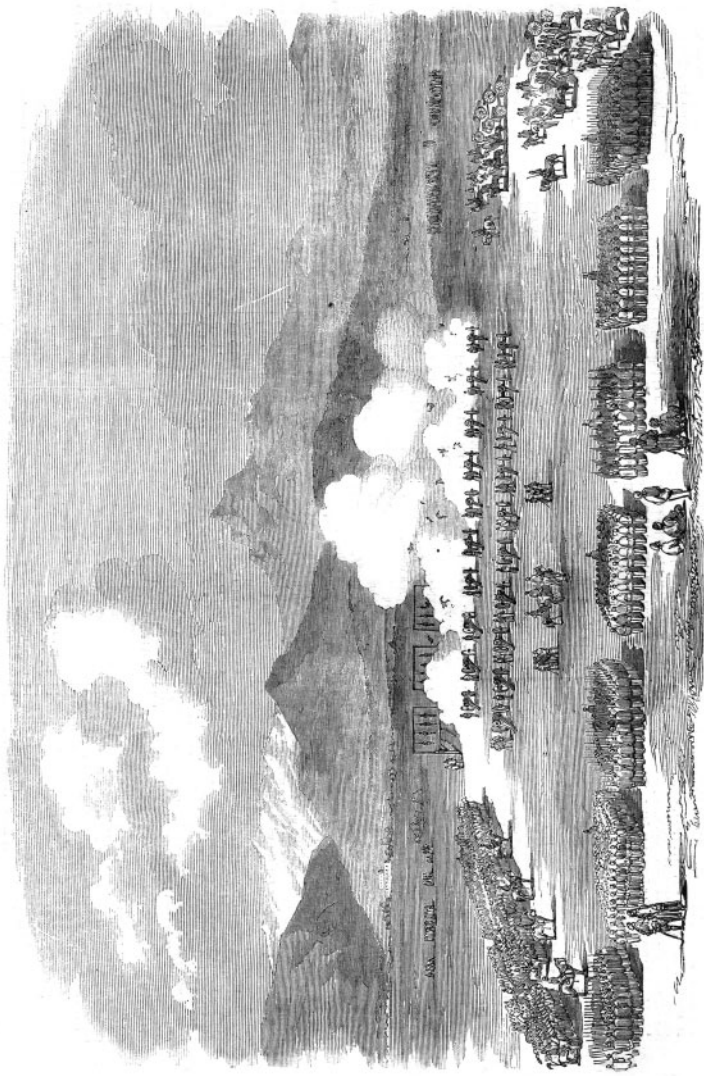
You must know that this is nearly the only form in which death has any terrors for a native . . . he knows that his body will be blown into a thousand pieces, and that it will be altogether impossible for his relatives, however devoted to him, to be sure of picking up all the fragments of his own particular body; and the thought that perhaps a limb of some one of a different religion to himself might possibly be burned or buried with the remainder of his own body, is agony to him.<sup>45</sup>

It is thus possible to talk about an 'orientalization' of colonial violence during 1857, as colonial knowledge was turned against colonial subjects in a form of spiritual warfare that transcended mere physical punishment. British retribution deliberately exploited the sepoys' fears of ritual pollution, and the mass executions by cannon enacted this particular logic in a highly instrumental and systematic manner. The rebels were treated as an undifferentiated mass, and the revenge of the British was thus defined by its indiscriminate and collective character.<sup>46</sup> The few critics who objected to such practices had little impact on either official policies or public opinion, mainly owing to the fact that the mass executions were commonly believed to be the most

<sup>44</sup> See also Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> 'Blowing from Guns at Peshawur', *Daily News*, 5 Nov. 1857, 2.

<sup>46</sup> See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, "'Satan Let Loose upon Earth': The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857", *Past and Present*, no. 128 (Aug. 1990).



3. A dioramic depiction of the execution of sepoys in Peshawar in 1857 that emphasizes the ritualized spectacle of colonial power.  
From *Illustrated London News*, 3 Oct. 1857.

effective, if not the only, means of maintaining British control.<sup>47</sup> Descriptions of the reaction of Indian spectators invariably made reference to their changing skin colour as a sure sign that the message had hit home: 'Their faces grew ghastly pale as they gazed breathlessly at the awful spectacle'.<sup>48</sup> More than a deterrent, however, these executions were perceived as uniquely effective in re-establishing colonial rule by bolstering the prestige of the British. In the semi-official history of the Indian uprising, John Kaye described the impact of the executions in Peshawar:

To our newly-raised levies and to the curious on-lookers from the country, the whole spectacle was a marvel and a mystery. It was a wonderful display of moral force, and it made a deep and abiding impression . . . Among the rude people of the border the audacity thus displayed by the English in the face of pressing danger excited boundless admiration. They had no longer any misgivings with respect to the superiority of a race that could do such great things, calmly and coolly, and with all the formality of an inspection-parade.<sup>49</sup>

Deliberately leaving out the gory details, Kaye turned the executions into a celebratory demonstration of the virtues of the stalwart British character that underpinned colonial rule and sustained the civilizing mission.<sup>50</sup> British accounts of the execution of sepoys and rebels were, furthermore, made morally palatable by consistently invoking Indian atrocities, and part of the retributive logic of colonial violence that relied on indigenous practice was thus derived from the aggression ascribed to Indians in what the anthropologist Michael Taussig has described as 'colonial mimesis'.<sup>51</sup> Execution by cannon could thus be presented as both justified and civilized or, as Lord Roberts put it, 'Awe inspiring, certainly, but probably the most humane, as being a sure and instantaneous mode of execution'.<sup>52</sup> Visual representations of executions by cannon, disseminated through the press across the empire, similarly provided an

<sup>47</sup> See Christopher Herbert, *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* (Princeton, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> 'Blowing from Guns at Peshawur'.

<sup>49</sup> John Kaye and G. B. Malleeson, *History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8*, 6 vols. (London, 1888–9), ii, 369–70.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 369 n.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago, 1987).

<sup>52</sup> Field-Marshal Lord Roberts of Kandahar, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (London, 1897), 68 n.

image of a carefully orchestrated military display indicative of the order that British rule imposed on Indian society.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from the brute language of power and terror, colonial violence and its representation during 1857 thus conveyed a reassuring message to Anglo-Indian and British audiences as well.<sup>54</sup> This secondary function of colonial violence is clearly reflected in an eyewitness account of an execution in Bombay published in Charles Dickens's magazine *Household Words* in early 1858:

Those who witnessed the impressive scene will never forget it. The Europeans were scarcely one to a thousand — in fact, they could hardly be seen amongst the myriads of Asiatics; but all appeared as cool and confident as if they had been at a review in Hyde Park. And yet there was scarcely a man present who had not been sleeping with a loaded revolver in his bedchamber for months . . .<sup>55</sup>

The public execution was in fact described as a perfect reflection of the colonial situation itself, with the British isolated and outnumbered but ultimately triumphant thanks to their resolve and strength of character. In this sense, the mass executions served to sustain the 'bluff' that was colonialism, and shore up the self-confidence of the British in the crucible of rebellion. The executions, though, were messy affairs, both literally and symbolically, and it was only by sanitizing the accounts of sepoys being blown from guns that they could be represented as orderly and unequivocally efficacious performances. Kaye's assessment of the executions in Peshawar was in fact belied by the account of Lord Roberts, who witnessed the affair:

It was a terrible sight, and one likely to haunt the beholder for many a long day; but that was what was intended. I carefully watched the sepoys' faces to see how it affected them. They were evidently startled at the swift retribution which had overtaken their guilty comrades, but looked more crest-fallen than shocked or horrified, and we soon learnt that their determination to mutiny, and make the best of their way to Delhi, was in nowise changed by the scene they had witnessed.<sup>56</sup>

This was not a controlled ritual, and the 'stinking shower' of human remains was virtually impossible to instrumentalize.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, *Illustrated London News*, 3 Oct. 1857.

<sup>54</sup> See also Michael G. Vann, 'Of Pirates, Postcards, and Public Beheadings: The Pedagogic Execution in French Colonial Indochina', *Historical Reflections*, xxxvi, 2 (Summer 2010).

<sup>55</sup> 'Blown Away!', *Household Words*, 27 Mar. 1858, 350.

<sup>56</sup> Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India*, 69.



Quite often the executions went terribly wrong, turning the carefully choreographed ceremony into a grim farce, as was described by one medical officer:

One wretched fellow slipped from the rope by which he was tied to the guns just before the explosion, and his arm was nearly set on fire. Whilst hanging in his agony under the gun, a sergeant applied a pistol to his head, and three times the cap snapped, the man each time wincing from the expected shot. At last a rifle was fired into the bottom of his head, and the blood poured out of the nose and mouth like water from a briskly handled pump. This was the most horrible sight of all. I have seen death in all its forms, but never anything to equal this man's end.<sup>57</sup>

While the British believed that the public executions effectively forced Indians into submission and buttressed their loyalty, it is clear that the bloody spectacles might as easily have driven Indian troops, and the wider population, away from the colonial rulers.<sup>58</sup> The supposed efficacy of executions by cannon, however, was far too important to allow the British authorities to acknowledge formally their ambiguous symbolism and messy reality, let alone condemn the practice. In the House of Commons, Lord Stanley expressed this sentiment in no uncertain terms: 'Only by great exertions — by the employment of force, by making striking examples, and inspiring terror, could Sir J. Lawrence save the Punjab; and if the Punjab had been lost the whole of India would for the time have been lost with it'.<sup>59</sup> British rule in India, in other words, was sustained by the application of exemplary violence, and this became one of the founding narratives of the colonial state in India after 1857.

The language and mode of analysis derived from Foucault's discussion of executions, based as it was purely on Western concepts of sovereignty and statehood, is thus also of limited use when applied to the colonial situation.<sup>60</sup> The executions of 1857 were not spectacles of entertainment for the masses, nor

<sup>57</sup> 'Blowing from a Gun', *Preston Chronicle*, 7 Nov. 1857, 2.

<sup>58</sup> Some accounts clearly suggest that sepoys only deserted when the British lost trust in them, or when indiscriminate reprisals left wavering troops no other option but mutiny: see, for instance, F. O. Mayne, *Narrative of Events Attending the Outbreak of Disturbances and the Restoration of Authority in the District of Banda, in 1857–58* (Allahabad, 1858), pt 2, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Hansard*, 3rd ser. (Commons), cviii, cols. 146–60 (14 Mar. 1859).

<sup>60</sup> See also Diana Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica', *Journal of Social History*, xxxiv, 4 (2001); Taylor C. Sherman, 'Tensions of Colonial Punishment: Perspectives on Recent Developments in the Study of Coercive Networks in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean', *History Compass*, vii, 3 (2009).



were they lessons in citizenship, not least because Indians did not enjoy the status of citizens within the colonial state. Ruling through coercion rather than consent, the British could only ever hope to assert that power, not to elicit the approval of the crowd.<sup>61</sup> And where the European sovereign might fear that the crowd identified with the convict on the scaffold, the British in India could simply assume this to be the case; the mass executions were never intended solely, or even primarily, for the attendant sepoys, but by extension were intended for the entire Indian population. Accordingly, these rituals became occasions for the British to reinforce racialized hierarchy as both native regiments and locals were forcibly gathered to witness the spectacle, invariably and demonstratively covered by the loaded guns of European troops prepared to put into action the symbolic message of the executions. The colonial execution was thus aimed, sometimes quite literally, at the native spectators (in uniform and without) but operated within a structure of power from which they were specifically excluded. These displays, furthermore, marked the ultimate point of escalation in the application of brute force: beyond the cannon, there was no tool left in the armoury of the colonial state. As a political ritual, the mass executions were accordingly both performative and constitutive of colonial power.

As the uprising was eventually put down, this power was transferred in 1858 from the East India Company to the British Crown, heralding what many expected to be a new era of order and tranquillity.<sup>62</sup> Memories of the 'Mutiny', however, died hard, and 1857 was not to be the last time that British rule in India was so demonstratively maintained by the sword rather than the pen.

### III

#### 'THE TRICK OF BLOWING MEN FROM GUNS'

Years later, when Punjab was again shaken by unrest and the colonial authorities believed themselves to be faced by yet another massive outbreak, a British officer took it upon himself

<sup>61</sup> See also Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1998).

<sup>62</sup> Thomas R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857–1870* (Princeton, 1964).

to punish the so-called 'rebels'. Peace had in fact been restored by the time the brutal and indiscriminate punishment was inflicted in a singularly exemplary fashion. The government initially responded with approval, yet as soon as details of the affair reached the press and the wider public, a scandal erupted both in India and in Britain. The affair became a cause for national embarrassment, and it was hotly debated in London and throughout the empire. The officer responsible was eventually removed from his post, although there was substantial support for his actions among the Anglo-Indian community in particular, and a public collection of funds was later organized for his benefit.

This brief outline of events refers not to the Amritsar massacre but to the suppression of what became known officially as the 'Kooka outbreak' almost five decades earlier. In January 1872, Deputy Commissioner J. L. Cowan responded to a minor *émeute* among the Kuka Sikhs by summarily executing sixty-eight prisoners by having them blown from cannon in the small principality of Malerkotla in Punjab. The fact that this all but forgotten event in many ways anticipated General Dyer's actions is suggestive of a level of continuity in the forms and functions of colonial violence that has so far remained unacknowledged in the historiography. Effectively bridging the 'cataclysms' of 1857 and 1919, this minor event, which rarely receives even a cursory reference in standard histories of the Raj, nevertheless provides a crucial opportunity to read colonial violence and its entanglement with colonial anxieties.

The Kukas, formally known as Namdharis, were a revivalist sect within Sikhism who became known during the early 1870s for a series of murderous attacks on Muslims in Punjab.<sup>63</sup> After the failed raid on two small towns, Malodh and Malerkotla, the surviving members of a Kuka gang, many of whom were wounded, were captured in mid January 1872.<sup>64</sup> The attacks had been desperate actions by a motley group of impoverished men; they had no clear plan or strategy, and they were certainly not part of a bigger conspiracy or the vanguard of a Kuka rising.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> W. H. McLeod, 'The Kukas: A Millenarian Sect of the Punjab', in G. A. Wood and P. S. O'Connor (eds.), *W. P. Morrell: A Tribute* (Dunedin, 1973).

<sup>64</sup> The main sources for the details of the attacks are to be found in *Copy of Correspondence: or, Extracts from Correspondence, Relating to the Kooka Outbreak*, Parliamentary Papers, 1872 (356), xlv.

<sup>65</sup> T. D. Forsyth to L. H. Griffin, 20 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 20.

To the British, however, the Kuka affair was little short of a second 'Mutiny'. Amid rumours that Kukas were gathering in the thousands for renewed attacks, Cowan hastened to Malerkotla to deal with the captives.<sup>66</sup> Although it soon turned out that initial reports of the attacks had hugely exaggerated the seriousness of the situation, he nevertheless proposed to execute the prisoners by blowing them from cannon: 'They are open rebels, offering contumacious resistance to constituted authority, and, to prevent the spreading of the disease, it is absolutely necessary that repressive measures should be prompt and stern . . . this incipient insurrection must be stamped out at once'.<sup>67</sup> Cowan immediately went ahead with the mass execution in spite of the fact that he received explicit orders to wait for the arrival of his superior, Commissioner and Superintendent T. D. Forsyth. When Forsyth reached the place the following day, he felt compelled to support Cowan's actions lest the authorities should be perceived to be weak, and the remaining prisoners were executed. On 17 and 18 January 1872 a total of sixty-eight Kukas were thus blown from guns at Malerkotla.<sup>68</sup>

Occurring just fifteen years after the Indian uprising, the British response to the Kuka affair was very much shaped by the memory of 1857. Faced with what he perceived to be 'an open rebellion', Cowan had simply followed the example provided by the 'Mutiny', and the link between the two events was further established by his description of the Kukas as 'rebels' and through the manner in which he punished them.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Forsyth claimed that Cowan's chosen mode of execution was 'a proceeding warranted by former precedents when large numbers of rebels were thus disposed of in 1857'.<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, it was not just the terminology and means of execution that were reminiscent of 1857; the very rationale provided by Cowan closely mirrored the reasoning that had informed the mass executions of that year: 'A rebellion, which might have attained large dimensions, was nipped in the bud, and a terrible and prompt punishment was in my opinion absolutely necessary to

<sup>66</sup> J. L. Cowan to Forsyth, 15 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>67</sup> Cowan to Forsyth, 16 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 11.

<sup>68</sup> Forsyth to Griffin, 8 Apr. 1872, *ibid.*, 50–2.

<sup>69</sup> Order by Cowan, 18 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>70</sup> Forsyth to Griffin, 19 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 18.

prevent the recurrence of a similar rising'.<sup>71</sup> Invoking the horrors of the past, when British men, women and children had been killed, Cowan and Forsyth both sought to legitimize the execution of the sixty-eight Kukas, but their response also drew on other colonial precedents. Following what appeared to be random attacks on Europeans by Muslim ghazis, or fanatics, on the North-West Frontier, the Murderous Outrages Act of 1867 had enabled the summary execution of such prisoners following cursory trials.<sup>72</sup> The Kukas were thus described in terms very similar to those applied by the colonial authorities to Muslim 'fanatics', and the official reports were replete with references to their 'frenzy' and 'fanatical fury'.<sup>73</sup>

Forsyth, in particular, was at pains to present a dire image of the threat posed by the Kukas, whose behaviour throughout Punjab he deemed 'a sufficient indication that there is some intention of a general rising, and the slightest failure on the part of the authorities to deal promptly with the marauders now caught would be a signal to concealed parties to rush forward'.<sup>74</sup> Fears of a second 'Mutiny' ran deep among the British in India, and anxieties of a general rising were a common trait in colonial governance after 1857. The fact that Cowan had transgressed his authority and carried out the executions in direct defiance of his superior's order, however, was an altogether different matter. While he enjoyed the tacit support of the government of Punjab, the governor-general of India, the earl of Mayo, did not condone the circumstances surrounding the executions, and within a week of the incident Cowan was suspended pending further inquiries.<sup>75</sup>

The official response to the 'outbreak' brought to light the tension that existed between the government of Punjab and the central government of India. The lieutenant-governor of Punjab, Sir Robert Henry Davies, insisted that the captured Kukas were no ordinary criminals but had forfeited their lives owing to the nature of their crimes: 'Originating in a carefully stimulated religious fanaticism, they had a political object, every step in the attainment of which threatened the most serious disturbance

<sup>71</sup> Cowan to Forsyth, 17 Jan. 1872 (2), *ibid.*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> See Mark Condos, 'Licence to Kill: The Murderous Outrages Act and the Rule of Law in Colonial India, 1867–1925', *Modern Asian Studies*, 1 (2016).

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, Cowan to Forsyth, 15 Jan. 1872, in *Copy of Correspondence*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Forsyth to Griffin, 19 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 18.

<sup>75</sup> E. C. Bayley to Griffin, 24 Jan. 1872, *ibid.*, 17.

of the existing order of things'.<sup>76</sup> Davies's interjection on Cowan's behalf thus invoked the central tenets of the 'Punjab system', which favoured personal discretion over technical legalism. True to the spirit of his predecessors during the 'Mutiny', Davies even defended Cowan's choice of execution: 'Blowing from a gun is an impressive and merciful manner of execution, well calculated to strike terror into the bystanders'.<sup>77</sup> The government's decision on the case, however, constituted a direct rebuttal of the proponents of the Punjab system.<sup>78</sup> Despite the difficult situation in which Cowan had found himself, the manner of the execution, 'its excessive and indiscriminate severity', was deemed to be entirely unjustified.<sup>79</sup> Worst of all was the fact that, by the time the executions took place, there was no longer any immediate threat: 'It is in short obvious', Mayo stated, 'that his motive in ordering the executions was to prevent a rising which he considered imminent, by an act calculated to strike terror into the whole Kuka sect'.<sup>80</sup> As a result, Cowan was permanently suspended from his position, while Forsyth was transferred to another province where he would have no authority in matters relating to native states.<sup>81</sup> (See Plate 4.)

The belief that Cowan and Forsyth had, through their prompt action, saved the lives of many of their compatriots was, however, widely shared among Anglo-Indians, and the ardently colonial newspaper *The Englishman* stated that the two 'deserve the best thanks and admiration of the English community in India'.<sup>82</sup> Once Cowan's dismissal became public knowledge, a subscription was organized by the readers of the newspaper, which reported that 'We learn from various sources that subscriptions are being set on foot at all large stations in Upper India for Mr. L. Cowan, whose summary dismissal has evoked a

<sup>76</sup> Griffin to Bayley, 7 Feb. 1872, *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>77</sup> Griffin to Bayley, 29 June 1872, quoted in *Gooroo Ram Singh and the Kuka Sikhs: Rebels against the British Power in India*, ed. Nahar Singh, 3 vols. (New Delhi, 1965–7), ii, 81.

<sup>78</sup> 'Final Orders of General Governor in Council', Bayley to Griffin, 30 Apr. 1872, in *Copy of Correspondence*, 54–8.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 57–8. See also Judicial Department to the duke of Argyll, 2 May 1872, in *Copy of Correspondence*, 26.

<sup>82</sup> *Englishman*, 10 Feb. 1872.

feeling of universal indignation throughout all classes of the Anglo-Indian community'.<sup>83</sup> Yet the affair affected more than just the Anglo-Indian community: touching upon the very nature and prestige of the British empire, it was widely debated throughout the imperial metropole, including the House of Commons.<sup>84</sup>

Initially opinions were divided, but, as more details of the events reached England, attitudes changed and the initial expressions of anxiety concerning the threat posed by the Kukas were increasingly replaced by incredulity.<sup>85</sup> The fact remained that no British lives had been lost during the attacks on Malodh and Malerkotla, and to many observers the fears of rebellion seemed misplaced and the executions blatantly excessive.<sup>86</sup> The Kuka affair soon disappeared from the headlines and eventually from public memory. Cowan's attempts at rehabilitation failed and he disappeared into obscurity, while Forsyth successfully lobbied the new governor-general and went on to enjoy an illustrious career within the colonial administration, receiving numerous honours including a knighthood before his death in 1886.<sup>87</sup> Morally defensible or not, the suppression of the 'Kooka outbreak' further sustained the lessons of the 'Mutiny' and as such became part of the lore of the Raj. In Rudyard Kipling's short story 'On the City Wall', the sahib narrator asks an Indian acquaintance about a mysterious prisoner in the fort at Lahore:

'What is it?' I asked. 'Who is it?'

'A consistent man,' said Wali Dad. 'He fought you in '46, when he was a warrior-youth; refought you in '57 and he tried to fight you in '71, but you had learned the trick of blowing men from guns too well . . .'<sup>88</sup>

Written in 1888, the story takes place some fifteen years after the old Sikh Khem Singh, a fictional rebel, had been deported following the 'Kooka outbreak'. Allowed to return to Punjab from

<sup>83</sup> 'Letter to the Editor', *Englishman*, 14 May 1872.

<sup>84</sup> See *Times* and *Pall Mall Gazette*, Feb.–May 1872.

<sup>85</sup> See, for instance, 'India (from Our Correspondent)', *Times*, 26 Feb. 1872; see also *Times*, 3 Apr. 1872.

<sup>86</sup> 'The Kooka Massacre', *Examiner*, 1 June 1872, 545.

<sup>87</sup> 'This Evening's News: India', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 Aug. 1873, 7; *Autobiography and Reminiscences of Sir Douglas Forsyth*, ed. his daughter (London, 1887).

<sup>88</sup> Rudyard Kipling, 'On the City Wall', in Rudyard Kipling, *In Black and White* (Allahabad, [1888]), 78.





4. The original guns used by Cowan to execute the Kukas in 1872, exhibited at the Namdhari Shaheedi Smarak memorial at Malerkotla.  
Photo: the author.

his exile in Burma, Khem Singh's appetite for sedition soon awakens and the narrator unknowingly aids the old man to escape from his confinement:

He fled to those who knew him in the old days, but many of them were dead, and more were changed, and all knew something of the Wrath of the Government. He went to the young men, but the glamour of his name had passed away, and they were entering native regiments or Government offices, and Khem Singh could give them neither pension, decorations, nor influence — nothing but a glorious death with their backs to the mouth of a gun.<sup>89</sup>

In Kipling's story, the British use of exemplary punishment had served its purpose well and the spirit of rebellion was permanently subdued; the exertions of the old firebrand to stir up trouble anew no longer held any attraction for the local population. The story is characterized by a sense of paternalist complacency: even though the sahib is tricked into helping the old enemy of the state to escape, the threat of native revolt has long since been rendered harmless. Outside the quaint world of Anglo-Indian fiction, however, the final decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual development of Indian nationalism, which erupted into a forcefully anti-colonial movement after the ill-conceived partition of Bengal in 1905. Kipling's faith in the efficacy of colonial violence was thus entirely misplaced, and while the mass executions of 1857 and 1872 did leave an indelible memory, it was among Anglo-Indians and colonial officials, rather than the native population, that belief in the spectacle of violence took seed.

#### IV

##### 'AN EXCESS OF COLONIALISM'

The suppression of the Kuka affair was never explicitly mentioned during the debates over Dyer's actions, yet it is impossible not to recognize the one as the precursor to the other, and both events as manifestations of a particular colonial mindset shaped by the legacies of 1857. The disturbances of 10 April 1919, when official buildings were burned and British civilians were attacked and killed by Indian crowds, closely replicated the pattern of anti-colonial violence that constituted such a crucial element in the colonial memories of 1857. The

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

rioters at Amritsar thus inadvertently triggered a response that was overdetermined by the past, and the massacre should accordingly be recognized as one of those moments conforming to Sahlins's concept of the 'structure of the conjuncture'.<sup>90</sup> Dyer explicitly invoked his colonial experience when defending his actions before the Army Council back in Britain, in what amounted to a plea of diminished responsibility due to the trauma of the 'Mutiny':

But if one dominant motive can be extracted it was the determination to avert from the European women and children and those of the law-abiding Indian community the fate which I was convinced would be theirs, if I did not meet the challenge and produce the required effect to restore order and security . . . Of its force in the mind of an Indian Army officer of thirty-four years' residence in India I am sure the Army Council have no doubt.<sup>91</sup>

Cognizant of their own anxieties, even supporters of Dyer pointed to the continuing impact of 1857 as expressed by Brigadier-General Herbert Surtees's comments in the House of Commons:

Whenever the people of India show signs of unrest or of conspiracy or of revolution there rises before the minds of Anglo-Europeans the spectre of the Indian Mutiny and the horrors of Cawnpore, and they are constrained to ask themselves whether the disturbances are only the precursors of a similar revolution. So a greater force is used in quelling disturbances than would be used in other places where British rule is more firmly established.<sup>92</sup>

It is indeed noticeable that both Dyer and Cowan referred to the precedents of the 'Mutiny' in assessing the threat they were facing and in legitimizing their response. What I have described elsewhere as the 'Mutiny' motif provided both a nightmare scenario as well as a panacea for all local unrest: if the Kuka affair and nationalist protests in 1919 had the potential to escalate into full-blown rebellion on a scale similar to the Indian uprising, it was reasoned that they could also be suppressed by the very same means that had saved British rule six decades earlier.<sup>93</sup> After 1857 the colonial authorities thus

<sup>90</sup> Sahlins first developed this concept in Marshall Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (Ann Arbor, 1981). See also William H. Sewell Jr, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005).

<sup>91</sup> Army . . . Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B., 13.

<sup>92</sup> Hansard, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1777 (8 July 1920).

<sup>93</sup> Kim A. Wagner, "'Treading upon Fires': The 'Mutiny'-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India', *Past and Present*, no. 218 (Feb. 2013).

rarely responded to the specific circumstances surrounding local unrest but rather they responded to what they imagined that unrest was or could become: hence the consistent disproportionality of colonial state violence. With precedents such as the 'Mutiny' in mind, the exponential possibilities of even small-scale disturbances was boundless, as far as the British were concerned, and the official response inherently excessive. The Amritsar massacre was accordingly both retributive and pre-emptive: Dyer took revenge for the attacks on Europeans, including a woman, during the riots three days earlier, but he also acted to prevent a much bigger outbreak, which he believed to be incipient.

It was thus the application of a decidedly outdated mode of interpretation that led to the massacre, when, to put it bluntly, he responded to twentieth-century challenges with nineteenth-century methods. It should be obvious that the blueprint provided by the 'Mutiny' was entirely inappropriate to navigate India in the second decade of the twentieth century. Between 1857 and 1919, India had undergone a fundamental transformation and seen the emergence of the first major anti-colonial movement.<sup>94</sup> British rule on the subcontinent had also, in the decades just prior to the massacre, witnessed the first liberal reforms, however limited, while in Britain itself support for the empire was far from uniform. The challenge to British rule in India had thus changed dramatically during this period; the manner in which colonial officers such as Dyer responded to perceived threat, however, had not. As a critical event par excellence, the Amritsar massacre may thus be described as an anachronism.

As a closer examination of the events of 1857, 1872 and 1919 reveals, the forms and legitimacy of colonial violence were never contested, within the colonial sphere or in the imperial metropole. A feature in the American *Harper's Weekly* in 1888 made the following observation in reference to a painting by the Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin depicting an execution by cannon in British India: 'This scene was a standard British way

<sup>94</sup> While revolutionary nationalism flourished during the early decades of the twentieth century, it was a decidedly marginal aspect of the anti-colonial movements and never posed a serious threat to British rule: see Richard Popplewell, *Intelligence and Imperial Defence: British Intelligence and the Defence of the British Empire, 1904–1924* (London, 1995).

to settle scores, and continued long after the war of independence in 1857. It was hotly debated in British and Indian newspapers between liberals and conservatives. To the former it was an excess of colonialism, to the latter an essential ingredient'.<sup>95</sup> (See Plate 5.)

This 'excess of colonialism' caused concern because it belied the ideals of the civilizing mission in such a spectacular manner and made imperialism so hard to defend. Public opinion in Britain underwent a gradual transformation between 1857 and 1919, and colonial acts of violence, which had barely raised an eyebrow during the Indian uprising, caused an outcry in the aftermath of the First World War. Violence thus became increasingly difficult to legitimize, yet remained an intrinsic aspect of the colonial order, whether it was in the form of everyday beatings and whippings of servants and workers, the sustained use of force during wars of pacification and punitive expeditions, or later the brutal and drawn-out conflicts of decolonization. The official condemnation of Cowan and Dyer, therefore, ought not to be mistaken for an outright disavowal of colonial violence as such, but rather as an attempt to maintain the conceit of rule of law. More than the summary execution of the captured Kukas, for instance, what made Cowan's dismissal inevitable was the fact that he exceeded his authority and blatantly ignored orders from his superiors. The same goes for Dyer, and when we look at the findings of the Hunter Inquiry and the lessons identified by military theoreticians such as Charles Gwynn, it is difficult not to conclude that if only Dyer had fired warning shots and provided care for the wounded, he would not have been censored for firing on the crowd at Jallianwala Bagh.<sup>96</sup> Dyer was convicted mainly by his words rather than his deeds, and the fact remains that no officer was ever sanctioned for massacring so-called 'rebels' — only for not doing so within the bounds of law.

The formal execution of Kukas in 1872 and the improvised massacre of Indian civilians in 1919 obviously constituted distinct modes of colonial violence, the historical context and contingencies of which were, moreover, radically different.

<sup>95</sup> 'The Verestchagin Exhibition', *Harper's Weekly*, 17 Nov. 1888. This well-known painting is often mistaken for a depiction of sepoys being executed during 1857, but in fact shows the execution of Kukas at Malerkotla in 1872.

<sup>96</sup> Major-General Sir Charles W. Gwynn, *Imperial Policing* (London, 1934).

Both events, however, were shaped by the same fear of a second 'Mutiny' (however improbable), and the aim of their violence was strikingly similar. The legality of colonial violence, inevitably established or disputed *ex post facto*, thus mattered only in so far as official sanction and public opinion was concerned: during moments of crisis, the function of colonial violence did not differ significantly between executions resulting from a legal process, however perfunctory, and the discretionary actions of the 'man on the spot'.<sup>97</sup> Dyer's actions closely mimicked the ritual of formalized punishment, and while the Amritsar massacre was not technically speaking an execution, the logic that underpinned its violence was identical to the colonial rituals of power enacted during 1857 and afterwards. The local confrontation at Amritsar was perceived by Dyer in the light of a bigger existential struggle, and the fear that he and his men might be cut off and ambushed in the narrow alleys of the city was the very same fear that the British in India might be overrun. Crucially, the same act saved them all with a single stroke. The Amritsar massacre was thus 'calculated to strike terror' as much as were the mass executions of sepoys during the Indian uprising and of Kukas in 1872. The purely instrumental nature of the spectacle of violence as performative rather than punitive was made very clear by Sir John Lawrence prior to the execution of mutineers in Peshawar in June 1857:

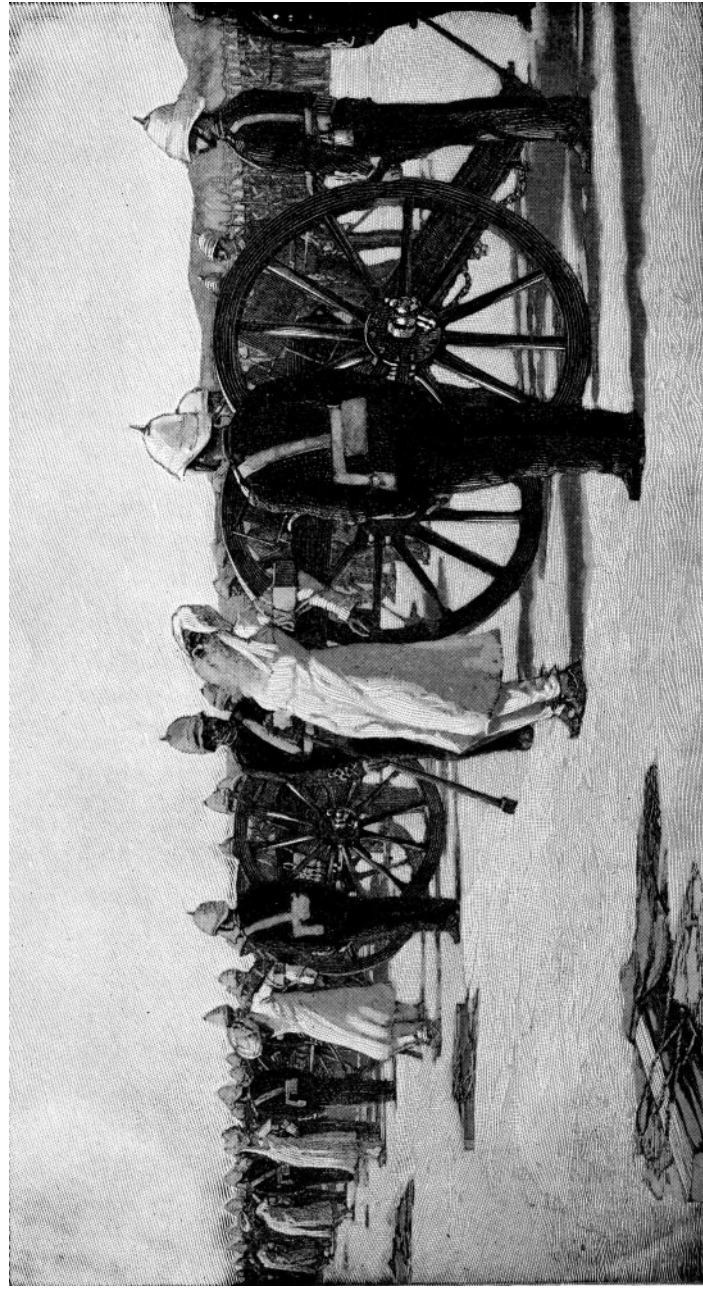
In respect to the mutineers of the 55th, they were taken fighting against us, and so far deserve little mercy. But, on full reflection, I would not put them all to death. I do not think that we should be justified in the eyes of the Almighty in doing so. A hundred and twenty men are a large number to put to death. Our object is to make an example to terrify others. I think this object would be effectually gained by destroying from a quarter to a third of them.<sup>98</sup>

Lawrence's successor sixty years on, Lieutenant-Governor E. D. MacLagan, expressed very similar views during the trial of the rioters who had killed two of the British civilians at Amritsar on 10 April 1919:

<sup>97</sup> Much recent scholarship on colonial violence has approached the subject through the framework of law and the legal discourses that at varying moments either problematized or legitimized the brutality of the imperial project: see R. W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford, 2008); Martin J. Wiener, *An Empire on Trial: Race, Murder, and Justice under British Rule, 1870–1935* (Cambridge, 2009); Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Kaye and Malleeson, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, 367.





5. The execution of Kukas at Malerkotla, Jan. 1872. From a print after the painting *An Execution in British India* by Vasily Vereshchagin.

The attack was a brutal and unjustifiable crime and all the accused have merited the sentence of death . . . In view, however, of the fact that a considerable number of persons have been sentenced to death for offences committed in Amritsar on this same day, I do not think it necessary in the interest of justice that the whole of the 20 petitioners should be executed.<sup>99</sup>

This, moreover, suggests that the overwhelming focus on the colonized body so common to much recent literature on colonial violence might not always be equally pertinent.<sup>100</sup> The evidence examined in this article certainly implies that the body of the condemned was less significant as a receptacle of colonial violence than it was simply as a message of colonial power.<sup>101</sup> The individual guilt of the captured sepoys and Kukas, as much as that of the crowd at Jallianwala Bagh, was inferred rather than proven, and ultimately of no real significance to the logic of the colonial violence to which they were subjected.

The symbolic significance of Dyer's actions is further revealed by his remarkable admission in front of the Hunter Committee: 'I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed the crowd without firing but they would have come back again and laughed, and I would have made, what I consider, a fool of myself'.<sup>102</sup> This statement is strikingly similar to the one found in George Orwell's famous short story 'Shooting an Elephant', written about his experience in Burma little more than a decade after Amritsar.<sup>103</sup> Speaking from opposite ends of the political spectrum, Dyer and Orwell both gave voice to the acute sense of vulnerability that characterized the colonial experience, especially during moments of crisis. The perceived need to maintain British prestige and save face at all costs thus imbued colonial violence with a crucially performative function. With the

<sup>99</sup> Order by E. D. MacLagan, Amritsar (National Bank Case), 16 June 1919: Punjab State Archives, Chandigarh, Home Judicial, 5315, 15. See also Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India*, 20.

<sup>100</sup> See E. M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947* (Cambridge, 2001); Steven Pierce and Anupama Rao (eds.), *Discipline and the Other Body: Correction, Corporeality, Colonialism* (Durham, NC, 2006).

<sup>101</sup> See also Rudrangshu Mukherjee, 'The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857: Reply', *Past and Present*, no. 142 (Feb. 1994), 184.

<sup>102</sup> Testimony of Dyer, 117.

<sup>103</sup> 'A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do': George Orwell, 'Shooting an Elephant', *New Writing* (Autumn 1936).

very survival of the colonial state at stake, the function of violence was simply to 'strike terror' and, as Dyer put it, 'There could be no question of undue severity'.

The need to maintain racial hierarchies further reveals the Amritsar massacre to be just the most extreme expression of what Partha Chatterjee has described as the 'rule of colonial difference'.<sup>104</sup> The same logic that guided Dyer at Jallianwala Bagh also informed his invention of the 'crawling order': one was a brutal massacre, the other a relatively harmless but very public humiliation, yet both constituted culturally specific displays of colonial power and both were intrinsically collective and implicitly racialized. The entire range of punishment available to the British in India, what Taylor Sherman has described as the 'coercive network', was deployed in Punjab during the disturbances of 1919, from compulsory displays of respect towards Europeans in the street (salaaming) to machine-gun strafing from aeroplanes and armoured trains.<sup>105</sup> Each of these measures was predicated on the bodily alterity and essential 'othering' of Indians. Under colonial rule, the local population never enjoyed the status of subjects and could instead be treated collectively as potential enemies during disturbances. This is what Achille Mbembe referred to when he suggested that 'the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended — the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of "civilization"'.<sup>106</sup>

## V

### THE SAVAGE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE

The Indian uprising, the Kuka affair and the Amritsar massacre might have been unique in scope but they were not exceptional in terms of the logic that guided the extreme forms of violence for which they have become bywords. While British rule in India was not essentially maintained through terror and rituals of violence

<sup>104</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi, 1994), 10, 19.

<sup>105</sup> Sherman, *State Violence and Punishment in India*, chs. 1–2.

<sup>106</sup> Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, xv, 1 (Winter 2003), 24. The theoretical point of reference is, of course, the work of Carl Schmidt and Giorgio Agamben.

between 1857, 1872 and 1919, the same cannot be said of the borderlands of the Raj, nor of the ever expanding frontiers of the empire. Fighting a range of local populations variously described as 'tribal', 'savages' or 'fanatics' on the North-West Frontier, in Afghanistan, in Sudan or throughout other parts of Africa and elsewhere, the British routinely massacred locals with machine guns, drove off cattle and burned villages in demonstrative displays of power.<sup>107</sup>

What became known as 'savage warfare' was not simply shaped by the tactical necessities of asymmetric fighting against irregular enemies but was based on deeply encoded assumptions concerning the inherent difference of local opponents.<sup>108</sup> In his study of German colonial violence in Africa as 'total war', Trutz von Trotha suggests that violence constitutes a universally understood language of power:

Violence is extremely convincing. It is simple and obvious. There are no communication problems. The 'language of violence' needs no translation — and this applies particularly to a world in which the colonial conquerors could make themselves understood in their meetings with Africans only when they were accompanied and assisted by interpreters. In the language of violence, conquerors can express themselves directly and may also know that they have been understood.<sup>109</sup>

As the cases examined in this article suggest, however, this is a rather naive understanding of how violence worked within a colonial context. Colonial violence was predicated on the assumption that the only language understood by 'uncivilized'

<sup>107</sup> The literature is extensive, but see T. R. Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849–1947* (Basingstoke, 1998); Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau: The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency* (Cambridge, 2013), esp. ch. 4.

<sup>108</sup> The use of exemplary force was obviously not limited to the British but a common feature of colonial warfare within all the European and American empires: see, for instance, Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, 2005); Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa* (Oxford, 2009); Michael C. Hawkins, 'Managing a Massacre: Savagery, Civility, and Gender in Moro Province in the Wake of Bud Dajo', *Philippine Studies*, lix, 1 (2011); Petra Groen, 'Colonial Warfare and Military Ethics in the Netherlands East Indies, 1816–1941', *Journal of Genocide Research*, xiv, 3–4 (2012); William Gallois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony* (Basingstoke, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> Trutz von Trotha, '"The Fellows Can Just Starve": On Wars of "Pacification" in the African Colonies of Imperial Germany and the Concept of "Total War"', in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds.), *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914*, new edn (Cambridge, 2006), 422.

people was a prompt and vigorous response. The perceived necessity of nipping unrest in the bud, invoked by Cowan in 1872, assumed the force of doctrine within British military practice. In C. E. Callwell's classic manual *Small Wars*, first published in 1896, the author argued that 'The lower races are impressionable. They are greatly influenced by a resolute bearing and by a determined course of action'.<sup>110</sup> In what could have been a direct quotation from Forsyth, Callwell further stated that 'Uncivilized races attribute leniency to timidity'.<sup>111</sup> Colonial violence was culturally constructed, and the levels of brutality deemed to be necessary within the European empires were considered unacceptable in conflicts between 'civilized' people. It was precisely because of the perceived need for a culturally specific 'translation' of violence that colonial punishment and military campaigns in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were so demonstratively brutal. As a technique of power, colonial violence during moments of crisis was not simply a means to an end but an end in itself.<sup>112</sup>

The brutal tactics of pacification and the punitive campaigns were never entirely banished from the armoury of imperialism, even as colonial rule became firmly established. The British policy of reprisals in Ireland during the 'Troubles', for instance, which included the burning of villages and indiscriminate shootings of civilians, merely reprised tactics that had been used for decades during colonial campaigns in Africa and Asia.<sup>113</sup> The same applies to the increasing reliance on air power against 'uncivilized' enemies across the empire, which was in essence a continuation of the same strategies of performative and exemplary force described in this article, though by different means.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>110</sup> C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3rd edn (London, 1906), 72.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>112</sup> See also Mark Mazower, 'Violence and the State in the Twentieth Century', *American Historical Review*, cvii, 4 (2002).

<sup>113</sup> Charles Townshend, *The British Campaign in Ireland, 1919–1921: The Development of Political and Military Policies* (London, 1975). It is noteworthy, however, that even during the conflict in Ireland, there was still nothing comparable to the racialized forms of punishment meted out to Indians in Punjab in 1919: see D. M. Leeson, *The Black and Tans: British Police and Auxiliaries in the Irish War of Independence* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>114</sup> David Killingray, '“A Swift Agent Government”: Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916–1939', *Journal of African History*, xxv (1984); Priya Satia, 'The Defense' (cont. on p. 222)



As a direct result of the fallout from Dyer's actions, the British army adopted the doctrine of 'minimum force' during military operations. Yet this doctrine, which purportedly informed British imperial policing during the inter-war period and counter-insurgency after 1945, in truth made a virtue out of necessity. Outnumbered and overstretched, the British had to maintain control throughout the empire using the limited means at their disposal, and the application of force was thus determined by practical constraints as much as strategic and political considerations. For minimum force to be effective it also had to be exemplary, and, paradoxically, it thus required the pre-emptive application of extreme force to suppress riots and insurrections before they escalated. In practice, 'minimum force' and exemplary violence were not incompatible, and neither 'minimum force' nor the 'rule of law' necessarily entailed restraint.<sup>115</sup>

During moments of crisis, as in Punjab in 1919, the 'frontiers' of empire can be said to have contracted as spectacular modes of coercion, punishment and violence, usually relegated to the margins of colonial control, were deployed within the heartland of the colony. It was this implicit admission of colonial failure, however brief, that caused such embarrassment and outcry as the pretences of the civilizing mission were momentarily cast aside and the brute power of the colonial project was revealed in all its bloody glory. The focus on large-scale violence in the colonial sphere is thus not simply a matter of studying the highlights in the grand narrative of imperialism and anti-colonial struggles, as Jonathan Saha has recently suggested.<sup>116</sup> By traversing these spectacles of violence we are in fact mapping the perceived weakness and sense of vulnerability of the colonial state: the ebb and flow of colonial anxieties.

(n. 114 cont.)

of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia', *American Historical Review*, cxi, 1 (2006).

<sup>115</sup> See also Purnima Bose and Laura E. Lyons, 'Dyer Consequences: The Trope of Amritsar, Ireland, and the Lessons of the "Minimum" Force Debate', *boundary 2*, xxvi, 2 (Summer 1999).

<sup>116</sup> Jonathan Saha, 'Histories of Everyday Violence in British India', *History Compass*, ix, 11 (Oct. 2011), 845.



## VI

## CONCLUSION

The Amritsar massacre was a key transformative moment in the history of British India, but it reflected the brutality of the early stages of pacification and consolidation of empire as well as anticipating the later conflicts of decolonization. The process of decolonization following the two world wars, which saw imperial disengagement and policing give way to counter-insurgency, is usually examined in complete isolation from the period before 1918.<sup>117</sup> In consequence, it is usually assumed that the inter- and post-war periods saw an intensification of colonial violence as imperial powers sought to maintain control in the face of increasing opposition from anti-colonial nationalism and other global forces. However, the late colonial state only appears to have assumed more repressive forms, with increasing recourse to indiscriminate violence, if one assumes a perspective restricted to the twentieth century. Considered from the vantage point of 1857, the brutality of later colonial policing and counter-insurgency can hardly be described as either 'radicalized' or 'escalating'.<sup>118</sup> Whether conventional historical periodization, determined primarily by structures and events central to European history, has any applicability within a broader global context is indeed questionable. If new forms of colonial governance developed following each of the world wars, the logic that underpinned the violence by which they were sustained was anything but new.<sup>119</sup> Colonial violence retained at its core a surprising degree of continuity during the long

<sup>117</sup> See, for instance, Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–1968* (Cambridge, 2006); Martin Shipway, *Decolonization and its Impact: A Comparative Approach to the End of the Colonial Empires* (Malden, Mass., 2008); Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L. J. Butler (eds.), *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial States, 1918–1975* (London, 2008).

<sup>118</sup> The concept of 'radicalization' in the colonial context appears to be particularly popular among German scholars, influenced, in part at least, by Hannah Arendt and the historiography of the Third Reich: see, for instance, Fabian Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria*, trans. Dona Geyer (Philadelphia, 2013); and, as suggested by the title, Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thum (eds.), *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear and Radicalization* (Göttingen, 2013).

<sup>119</sup> See, for instance, Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton, 2008); Martin Thomas, 'Intelligence and the Transition to the Algerian Police State: Reassessing French Colonial Security after the Sétif Uprising, 1945', *Intelligence and National Security*, xxviii, 3 (2013).

century from the 1850s to the 1950s.<sup>120</sup> Accordingly, we cannot begin to understand the forms and functions of colonial violence that characterized the withdrawal of Britain and other imperial powers from their respective colonies without considering its genealogy.

The violence of 1857, 1872 and 1919 was a reflection of weakness rather than strength and the function of a colonial order that was never sufficiently strong to do without exemplary punishment or demonstrative violence. It is ironic that the inherent weakness of the colonial state was so dramatically revealed through its performance of absolute power. This contradiction of 'white power and white vulnerability'<sup>121</sup> was the root cause of exemplary violence within the colonial world, as Governor-General Lord Napier poignantly acknowledged when passing his final orders in the Kuka affair in 1872: 'Summary orders are often taken for acts of vigour, when they are in truth acts of weakness. Such orders frequently show that those who give them doubt their own strength, and are afraid to be merciful to their opponents'.<sup>122</sup>

That the use of violence might even be counter-productive was conceded in the final report of the Hunter Committee when Dyer's rationale for opening fire at Jallianwala Bagh was finally dismissed in 1920: 'The employment of excessive measures is as likely as not to produce the opposite result to that desired'.<sup>123</sup> Colonial violence ultimately undermined colonial rule by alienating the native population and turning its victims into martyrs of nationalist movements. It is noticeable that sites of colonial violence have become central to anti-colonial narratives and today function as the locus of post-colonial pilgrimage, where former revolutionaries and apologetic Western leaders alike pay obeisance.

Not only was colonial violence self-defeating: it has also permanently soured efforts to gloss over the legacies of imperialism in the world today. When, during the Oxford

<sup>120</sup> This point is often made in connection with studies of concentration camps: see Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, 2013).

<sup>121</sup> Michael G. Vann, 'Fear and Loathing in French Hanoi: Colonial White Images and Imaginings of "Native" Violence', in Thomas (ed.), *French Colonial Mind*, ii, 52.

<sup>122</sup> 'Final Orders of General Governor in Council', 55.

<sup>123</sup> *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab*, 30–1.

Union debate of May 2015, the Indian member of parliament Shashi Tharoor (in)famously called for Britain to pay reparations to India for two hundred years of colonial exploitation, he included in his list of indictments the following: 'British imperialism had triumphed not just by conquest and deception on a grand scale, but by blowing rebels to bits from the mouths of cannons, massacring unarmed protesters at Jallianwala Bagh and upholding iniquity through institutionalised racism'.<sup>124</sup> This pithy statement gives no indication of the fact that the reliance on spectacles of violence was anything but triumphant and ultimately proved to be the undoing of empire.

*Queen Mary University of London*

*Kim A. Wagner*

<sup>124</sup> See Shashi Tharoor, 'Viewpoint: Britain Must Pay Reparations to India', *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33618621>> (accessed 15 July 2016).